



# Transylvanian Tributes to Ligeti

Thanatos in Contemporary Music,  
from the Tragic to the Grotesque

Edited by

**Bianca Țiplea Temeș**

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Media  
Musica



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**TRANSYLVANIAN TRIBUTES TO LIGETI**

**THANATOS  
IN CONTEMPORARY MUSIC:  
FROM THE TRAGIC TO THE  
GROTESQUE**

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# Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION: WINKING AT NEKROTZAR	V
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## Part I SONIC EPIGRAPHS

THE MEMORIAL TOPIC IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY AND SCHOENBERG'S MODERNIST GENEALOGIES	1
---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	---

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HERMANN DANUSER

'THIS IS MY DEATH SONG...' BETWEEN 'FUNÈBRE' AND 'GROTESQUE' IN BÉLA BARTÓK'S COMPOSITIONS OF 1908	29
-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	----

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LÁSZLÓ VIKÁRIUS

<i>REQUIEM PER SOLI, CORI E ORCHESTRA</i> BY BRUNO MADERNA (1946)	49
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PAVEL PUȘCAȘ & IOANA BADIU-AVRAM

REFLECTING WAR TRAUMAS: ROMAN PALESTER'S <i>REQUIEM</i> AND ZYGMUNT MYCIELSKI'S <i>RESCUE SONGS</i>	65
--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	----

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BEATA BOLESŁAWSKA

## Part II

# ARS MORIENDI

THANATOS AS RITUAL: ZOLTÁN JENEY'S FUNERAL RITE 91

ZOLTÁN FARKAS

FROM THANATOS TO THE ELYSIAN FIELDS  
IN THE MUSIC OF DAN DEDIU 113

OLGUȚA LUPU

THE SOUND OF FALLING TEARS: THE DAWN SONG  
(CÂNTECUL ZORILOR) IN ROMANIAN COMPOSITION 137

BIANCA ȚIPLEA TEMEȘ

## Part III

# LE TOUT PETIT MACABRE – À LIGETI

'ARE YOU DEAD, LIKE US?' THE LIMINAL STATUS  
OF THE UNDEAD IN THE MUSIC OF LIGETI 159

AMY BAUER

EXERCISES IN DYING? REFLEXIONS ON LIGETI'S UNPUBLISHED JUVENILE LATIN CANTATAS	183
-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------	-----

ELENA MARIA ȘORBAN

DEATH IN HAMBURG? MEMORIAL ASPECTS OF LIGETI'S LATE CONCERTO	217
-----------------------------------------------------------------	-----

BENJAMIN R. LEVY

FROM KYLWIRIA TO BRUEGHELLAND: CONCEPTS AND PRELIMINARY STAGES ON THE WAY TO <i>LE GRAND MACABRE</i>	239
---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	-----

HEIDY ZIMMERMANN

EPILOGUE	269
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LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS	273
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# Thanatos as Ritual: Zoltán Jeney's *Funeral Rite*

ZOLTÁN FARKAS

At a musicology conference on the topic 'Thanatos in Contemporary Music', one cannot evade the responsibility of talking about Zoltán Jeney's (1943–2019) *Funeral Rite*. Jeney's oratorio has been elevated to the position of the grandest Hungarian composition of the past forty years not only by the extraordinary size of its ensemble, its nearly three hours of running time, and the diversity of its poetic and musical realm – even the objective of the work is singular: it attempts to present the complete liturgy of the medieval Hungarian funeral rite.

The medieval funeral rite consisted of six series of events, which also define the cycles of the oratorio (see Table 1). First, the community, gathered in prayer at the bedside of the dying person, 'commended away' the soul of the departed at the time of death (I. *Commendatio animae*). After attending to the corpse, the vespers for the dead were said (II. *Vesperae Mortuorum*), then the corpse was taken to the church. There, a prayer vigil was held during the night (III. *Vigilia Defunctorum*; remnants of this practice survived in the Hungarian folklore where in certain villages, a singing wake was held next to the corpse lying in state in the home). During the day, the mass for the dead, i.e., the Requiem, was celebrated, to which the service of absolution at the bier was connected (IV. *Absolutio*). Then the deceased was carried to the cemetery in procession, where the burial took place in a regular order with singing and praying (V. *Depositio corporis*). At the end, the mourners returned to the

church, and the rite was concluded with the songs and texts of solace (VI. *Consolatio*).

**Table 1.** Structure of the medieval funeral rite in Hungary

I.	Commendatio animae – the commendation of the soul
II.	Vesperae mortuorum – vespers for the dead
III.	Vigilia defunctorum – vigil of the dead
IV.	Absolutio – Requiem & absolution
V.	Depositio corporis – burying
VI.	Consolatio – consolation

This funeral service paid the last honours to the deceased with such elaboration and naturalness which are unthinkable for the people of today. The twentieth and twenty-first centuries deprived human beings of the possibility of ‘good death’ with their mass slaughterhouses, genocides, institutionalised killing centres, or – in times of peace – indifferent places of riddance called healthcare institutes. The liturgical texts of the medieval funeral rite do not keep silent about the most profound misery, yet they guide the soul all along the hardest of paths with dignity, integrity, but also with humility and unwavering faith; and they provide the departed with the power of belonging to the community in dying and beyond.

Originally, the funeral rite may have taken six to eight hours to complete. In Jeney’s oratorio, the material is condensed into three hours, providing a cross section of the process. Even so, its scale is so monumental that it would prove a hopeless endeavour to provide a comprehensive picture thereof within the limits of this essay. Instead, I shall seek an answer for a single question: how Jeney’s composition is able to make the medieval ritual authentic and experienceable for the contemporary listener, today’s human being, who has lost their knowledge of *ars moriendi*, *Sterbekunst*, the art of dying.

## The Source of Inspiration – Plainchant in Hungary

The first inspiration for Jeney came from plainchant: he sang in the Schola Hungarica, the then freshly formed choir of Gregorian music, from 1975 to 1984. The founders of the ensemble, László Dobszay and Janka Szendrei, who later became outstanding figures of the international research on plainchant, paired their scholarly work with the art of performing from the very beginning (see Figures 1–4). Dobszay, a composer who at this time had already become a central figure of the Hungarian musical life as a researcher, performer, and teacher, urged the composers who sang in the Schola Hungarica to try their hands at making something out of the Gregorian repertoire. Dobszay's incentive is visible in the whole history of the Schola Hungarica. In the 1970s, György Kurtág and László Vidovszky were members of the ensemble, and composed instrumental interludes for the Gregorian chants numerous times.<sup>1</sup> (In 2000, at the symposium of IMS in Budapest, Dobszay presented a selection of works inspired by Gregorian chant in an address of his, in which he selected pieces from nine Hungarian composers' output.<sup>2</sup>) Vidovszky, together with Jeney, was among the founding members of the New Music Studio, Budapest, which launched in

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<sup>1</sup> The interludes composed by Kurtág, Jeney, and Vidovszky are available on the recordings listed below: Kurtág: *D'Adam a Abraham – Répons Grégoriens sur les Textes de la Genèse*, Quintana – Harmonia Mundi QUL-903032; *From Abraham to Moses*, Quintana QUL-903038; Jeney: Chimes, Bells, in *Polyphonic Vespers for Christmas and Easter*, Hungaroton HCD 12533; László Vidovszky: Signs, Interludes and Postludes, in *Plays of Saint Nicholas*, Hungaroton HCD 12887–88. The influence of plainchant is also palpable on some pieces from Kurtág's series *Játékok* [Plays and Games]. Within Vidovszky's oeuvre, the Gregorian inspiration is obvious in such a special medium as the pieces for piano-player composed in 1992: *Futaki ének* [Song from Futak] (*Inventor rutili*). BMC CD 014, László Vidovszky Etudes for MIDI Piano.

<sup>2</sup> László Dobszay, 'Chant Themes in the Contemporaneous Composition in Hungary', in *The Past in the Present: Papers Read at the IMS Intercongressional Symposium and the 10th Meeting of the CANTUS PLANUS, Budapest & Visegrád, 2000* (Budapest: Liszt Ferenc Academy of Music, 2003), 2:445–482.

1970; thus, the most important neo-avantgarde group of composers and the Schola Hungarica belonged to the same intellectual circles.<sup>3</sup>



**Figure 1.** László Dobszay



**Figure 2.** Janka Szendrei



**Figure 3.** Zoltán Jeney



**Figure 4.** György Kurtág

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<sup>3</sup> Other composer members of the Schola Hungarica were László Dubrovay (1944–), László Melis (1953–2018), András Soós (1954–), and Géza Gémesi (1961–).

Dobszay commissioned contemporary compositions on the Gregorian chants, among others, following the medieval practice of tropisation, that is, additions joined to the old canonical liturgical chants. Jeney's first experiment, the *Caput tropes*, was created in 1977 as a consequence. In 1979, Dobszay specifically commissioned Jeney to arrange the Gregorian responsory *Subvenite*. This composition, written in 1979 and premiered a year later, may be considered the primal core of the *Funeral Rite*.

Jeney employed his own compositional inventory of the time to the task at hand. Since the beginning of the 1970s he had been experimenting, after John Cage, with encoding several systems outside of music into musical notation. Since 1973, he had consistently used a tonal system in which he matched the letters of the Latin alphabet to notes.<sup>4</sup> The melody of the instrumental trope composed to *Subvenite* is nothing but the encoding of the text itself into notes (see Figures 5 and 6). The chords of the instrumental accompaniment of the Gregorian chant also came from this melody. Jeney formed the rhythm of the trope by inspiration of Messiaen's Indian rhythmic procedures: the number of the members of the series of rhythmic values is also defined by the letters of the text. (The word 'Subvenite', for instance, consists of nine letters, therefore a rhythmic series of nine members is associated to the nine notes of the melody; the individual values give the series 4-2-6-6-6-4-6-1-1, taking the quaver as the unit.) That is, nearly every

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<sup>4</sup>As Jeney stated: 'I started experimenting with letter-to-voice transcoding in order to test how to work with unforeseen systems for me in order to get unforeseen results.' (Cf. 'Spekuláció nélkül nincs intuíció – Jób könyvétől a fraktálokig. Jeney Zoltánnal beszélget a *Halotti szertartásról*' ['Without speculation there is no intuition'. From the Book of Job to the Fractals. Zoltán Jeney talks to Zoltán Farkas about his *Funeral Rite*.] *Holmi* 18/7 (July 2006): 869–902.) The most successful result of this compositional method in Jeney's workshop is the *Twelve Songs* for soprano, violin and piano (1975–1983) composed to poems by e. e. cummings, Dezső Tandori, William Blake, Sándor Weöres and Friedrich Hölderlin. Jeney had been employed the letter-to-voice transcoding since 1973. He used this technique for the first time to set Hungarian (Frigyes Karinthy's *Chinese Poem*) and German text (Nelly Sachs' *Wie leicht wird Erde sein*) to music. This compositional method also appears in his instrumental compositions without text, e.g. in *Arthur Rimbaud in the Desert* – for optional keyboard instrument, 1976

parameter of the music – melody, rhythm, even the instrumentation – is derived from the encoding of the text.

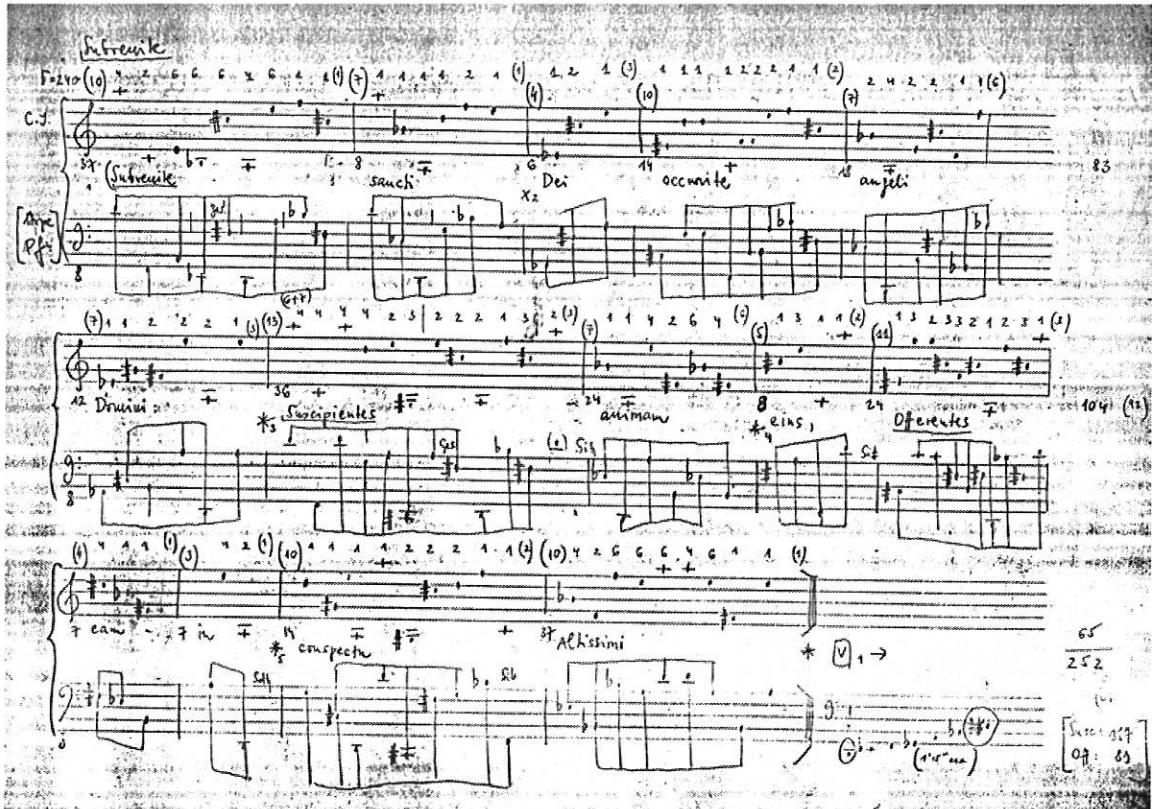


Figure 5. Sketch 1 of *Subvenite*. Manuscript sketch, private collection, Budapest. Reproduced by the kind permission of copyright holder.



Figure 6. Sketch 2 of *Subvenite*. Manuscript sketch, private collection, Budapest. Reproduced by the kind permission of copyright holder.

These procedures result in a strong musical process of strict logic; its sound reminds one of Far Eastern rituals due to its instrumentation, and it provides an exciting counterpoint to the Gregorian melody (see Example 1).

Example 1. Jeney, *Subvenite*

The musical score for Example 1, Jeney's *Subvenite*, is presented in four systems. Each system contains a treble staff and a bass staff. The first system is marked with 'ff' and '5 Gongs', and includes the instruction 'Corno ingl.' and 'simile'. The notation is dense, with frequent rests and complex rhythmic figures, particularly in the bass line. The piece is set in a key with one flat and a 3/4 time signature.

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Although the responsory *Subvenite* is sung twice in the funeral rite (in the *Commendatio animae* as well as in the *Absolutio*), it never occurred to either Dobszay or Jeney at this time to set the whole cycle to music. On the occasion of an authorial concert in October 1987, however, Jeney composed a further four movements, which, later, found their final place in section IV of the oratorio. This was the time when László Dobszay gave him the liturgy with the related chants of a sixteenth-century codex, the Pauline cantuale of Częstochowa. (The Paulines, the only religious order founded in Hungary, faithfully preserved the medieval Hungarian rite.) Jeney believed then that the year of his DAAD scholarship in Berlin would be enough time to set the complete cycle to music. In the end, the work took more than one and a half

decades. In the creation of the work, the deadlines of the premieres of different larger portions, which forced the progress of the composition of the *Funeral Rite*, played a significant role alongside László Dobszay's constant encouragement (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** The Genesis of *Funeral Rite* and its partial performances

1979	<i>Subvenite</i> for mixed choir and chamber ensemble. <b>Première: 14 Feb 1980</b> , Schola Hungarica, László Dobszay
1987	[5] <i>Movements for the Funeral Rite</i> for solo voices, mixed choir, and chamber ensemble. <b>Première: 5 Oct 1987</b> , Schola Hungarica, Chamber Ensemble of the New Music Studio, Amadinda Percussion Group, conducted by László Dobszay
1994	<b>Funeral Rite – Part I <i>Commendatio animae</i></b> (1994). <b>Première: 11 Mar 1994</b> , Hungarian Radio Choir, Budapest Festival orchestra, conducted by Yehudi Menuhin
2000	<b>Funeral Rite – Parts I–III</b> I. <i>Commendatio animae</i> (1994); II. <i>Vespera Mortuorum</i> (1995–2000); III. <i>Vigilia Defunctorum</i> (1987–2000). <b>Première: 28 Aug 2000</b> , Budapest, as a joint event of the IMS Intercongressional Symposium <i>Past in the Present</i> . Hungarian Radio Choir and Orchestra, conducted by János Kovács
2004	<b>Funeral Rite – Parts I–IV</b> I. <i>Commendatio animae</i> (1994); II. <i>Vespera Mortuorum</i> (1995–2000); III. <i>Vigilia Defunctorum</i> (1987–2000); IV. <i>Absolutio</i> (1987–2000); V. <i>Depositio Corporis</i> (2001–2004). <b>Première: 21 Apr 2004</b> , Hungarian Radio Choir and Orchestra, Amadinda Percussion Group, conducted by László Tihanyi
2005	<b>World Première of whole oratorio: 22 Oct 2005</b> , Budapest, Palace of Arts, Hungarian Radio Choir and Orchestra, Amadinda Percussion Group, conducted by Zoltán Kocsis

In what follows, I will attempt to illuminate the immense corpus of the music of the *Funeral Rite*. On the one hand, I will review the compositional techniques which Jeney contrasted with the traditional melodic repertoire. On the other hand, I will point out those – often quite daring – decisions by



which he troped or replaced liturgical chants with texts from the twentieth century and contemporary poetry. By virtue of these, not only did the large-scale structure of the oratorio become more succinct, but their 'message' was also given an acutely relevant character.

### Compositional Techniques – Fractal Melody

In retrospect, the *Funeral Rite* appears to be Jeney's professional autobiography. Every compositional method which he created in the key compositions of his oeuvre gravitated towards the *magnum opus* and found its place in the inventory of the oratorio. In 1979, Jeney read about the physicist Richard F. Voss's research in the April 1978 issue of the *Scientific American*, which investigated which sonic processes generated by certain random phenomena – such as the throwing of dice, Brownian motion, or fractals – are perceived as 'musical'. Jeney himself, too, generated such fractal melodies with the aid of an algorithm describing the generation of number series of fractal character. (His interest in the compositional application of fractals, thus, coincides with similar discoveries by György Ligeti, or, even, precede them somewhat.) He discovered a strong D tonality in one of the fractal series of 128 notes. Two years later, in the middle of his working on his *Twelve Songs*, Jeney applied a poem of János Pilinszky's to this series of 128 notes. (See Example 2.) Only in 1987–1988 did he recognise that he could not possibly have found a more adequate epigraph than the fractal melody associated with Pilinszky's verses with which to begin the entire ritual. The lonely wolf who saw humans as beautiful as no one apart from God, who was beaten to death by humans, is an obvious symbol of Christ; moreover, his being murdered also symbolises the time of death, the starting point of the *Funeral Rite*. Jeney decided at the same time that he would use the fractal series as raw material for the majority of the numerous psalms of the oratorio.

The melody tending towards D tonality was proven to combine exceedingly well with the Gregorian chants, too.

Example 2. The fractal melody as motto

**I. Commendatio animae**

**No 1. - Motto [sul testo di János Pilinszky]**

**Zoltán Jeney**

Recitativo  
(♩ = 94 - 106)

1

Baritono solo

Hol volt, hol nem volt, élt egy - szer egy ma - gá - nyos far - kas.

Violoncello solo

pizz.  
mp

6

Ma - gá - nyo - sabb az an - gya - lok - nál. El - ve - tó - dött egy - szer egy fa - lu - ba, és

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## Pseudo-modal scales

Jeney first used a 'pseudo-modal' system consisting of sixty-four scales of six tones in 1978, in his cantata *To Apollo* composed on Kallimakhos's text; the system later became the building material for many of his works. (See Example 3.) This tonal system consists of two incomplete Greek scales (of six tones each) which make up the twelve tones together, and of the sixty-two derived series which can be obtained by gradually retuning the two original scales towards each other. This set of tones appears, for example, in *Pater noster*, in the *oratio*s, in *Nunc dimittis*, or in *Prudence's Hymn* and in the orchestral interlude between its stanzas.

Example 3. Pseudo-modal scales, complementary scales in transition

### Mother chord

Psalm 129/130 appears in the funeral rite three times. The first verse of the text (*De profundis clamavi ad te Domine*) consists of twelve syllables, which inspired Jeney to apply that all-interval twelve-tone chord (also known as the 'mother chord') to the text which he used first in his orchestral piece *Alef – Hommage à Schönberg* in 1972. (See Example 4.) A four-part psalm recitation unfolds from the dramatic cry surging from the depths. Different sections of this material prepare the first appearance of the psalm in the second part, and they form the set of tones of the accompaniment of the folk music quotes, the wake songs, in the vespers.

Example 4. All-interval twelve-tone chord: *Mutter-akkord*. Unpublished vocal score, private collection, Budapest.

i. Psalmus 130: *De profundis clamavi*

♩ = 63

*f* *cresc. molto* *ff*

ad te, Do - mi - ne: *f*

*f* *cresc. molto* *ff*

ad te, Do - mi - ne:

*f* *cresc. molto* *ff*

cla - ma - vi ad te, Do - mi - ne:

*f* *cresc. molto* *ff*

cla - ma - vi ad te, Do - mi - ne:

De pro - fun - dis cla - ma - vi Do - mi - ne:

*f* *ff*

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### Arrangements of Gregorian melodies

It is interesting that Jeney had the most difficulty with finding the way to arrange the plainchant melodies; this is precisely the task which was commissioned and inspired by László Dobszay, since the encoding of the text of *Subvenite*, the earliest chant, into musical notes creatively evaded the problem. Here the arrangement of the Gregorian melody itself is simple: in Jeney's words, 'like a religious song equipped with an accompaniment. The accompaniment, in the end, could be something like what the village cantor

would play to it.<sup>5</sup> The composer found the solution which sets a worthy instrumental accompaniment to the plainchant melody in the second section of the oratorio in the vespers. The aforementioned mother-chord of the psalm *De profundis* contains all twelve notes and every possible interval. In this chord, the twelve notes of the chromatic scale are always assigned to a single specific pitch. Jeney was able to freely create the imitations, inversions, retrograde progressions of the arranged melody from this tonal structure. In the instrumental setting of the antiphon *Dominus custodit*, the shadow of the Gregorian chant melody is filtered and 'refracted' through the 'prism' of the logic of the Alef-chord's structure. The Gregorian melody sung in the tenor has its inverted counterpoint in the bass (see Example 5).

**Example 5.** *Dominus custodit*. Unpublished vocal score, private collection, Budapest.

**e. Antiphona: Dominus custodite**

107

Do-mi-nus cus-to-di-te ab-om-ni-ma-lia: cus-to-di-at a-ni-mam tu-am Do-mi-nus.

112

ni-mam tu-am Do-mi-nus.

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<sup>5</sup> Jeney and Farkas, 'Spekuláció nélkül nincs intuíció [Without speculation there is no intuition]', 879.

The chant melodies themselves are diversely transformed in several cases: their own inversions serve as counterpoint to the original melodies. The most complex example of this is *Absolve Domine* (No. 16). Every voice of the 16-part choir sings the original Gregorian melody in a prolation canon: the original melody, its inversion, retrograde, and retrograde inversion in four different pitches each (see Example 6). The extremely complex musical texture appears to reformulate György Ligeti's micropolyphony.

**Example 6.** Prolation canon based on the original Gregorian melody, its inversion, retrograde, and retrograde inversion. Unpublished vocal score, private collection, Budapest.

No 16 - Absolve Domine

The image displays a complex musical score for a 16-part choir. The title is "No 16 - Absolve Domine". The score consists of 16 staves, each representing a different voice part. The music is written in a single system, showing a dense texture of polyphony. The notation includes various rhythmic values, accidentals, and dynamic markings such as *mf* and *f*. The lyrics "Ab-solve do-mi-ne" are visible at the beginning of several staves. The score is a prolation canon, meaning each voice part sings the same melody at different intervals.

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The melody of the Gregorian antiphon sung *In paradisum* at the end of the church service, appears in the *Absolutio* sung by the female choir in prolational shifts (see Example 7). It is the moment in the liturgy when the gathering leaves the church with the coffin to the cemetery. The prolation canon evokes that special sonic effect which can be heard when the members of the long burial procession sing the same melody in offset from each other.

Example 7. Prolation canon, *In paradisum*

No 30 - Antifona: *In paradisum*

The image shows a musical score for a vocal piece titled 'No 30 - Antifona: In paradisum'. It features four staves. The top two staves are vocal lines with lyrics: 'In pa - ra - di - sum de - du - cant te an - ge - li in tu - o ad -'. The bottom two staves are piano accompaniment. The music is in 4/4 time and begins with a tempo marking of 144. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

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In this series of the arrangements of Gregorian chants, the moment comes when the composer associates the traditional chant melody to the 128-note fractal series (see Example 8). In the opening movement of the third part of the oratorio, the *Vigilia Defunctorum*, the fractal series creates a background of vibrating tension for the melody of the antiphon *Circumdederunt me – in stile concitato*.

Example 8. Instrumental accompaniment to the plainchant derived from the fractal series. Unpublished vocal score, private collection, Budapest.

The image shows a musical score for 'Example 8'. It consists of two systems. The first system shows a violin part (VI. I.) and a vocal line (Vcl.) with lyrics: 'cu - de - de - runt te - re - re -'. The second system shows a vocal line (Coco) and a piano accompaniment. The lyrics for the vocal line are: 'Cu - cu - de - de - runt te - re - ge -'. The piano accompaniment features a complex, rhythmic pattern derived from a fractal series. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

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\* \* \*

As Jeney advanced in the composition of the monumental six-part cycle, more and more often he replaced the liturgical text and melody with settings of poems or verses by twentieth-century and contemporary poets, instrumental commentaries, and original or pseudo-folk musical material. In the background of these procedures, we often find evidence of the intention to condense the material. For example, the five psalms of the vespers service would have increased the length of the second part of the oratorio too much, so the composer included instead 'wake songs' originating from Sopron county from László Lajtha's folk music collections; the songs themselves are no longer than the antiphons separating them, and the method of their setting is also identical. As a consequence, the entire vespers is unified into a single large movement, in which the numerous short elements are united by a *ricercare* articulated by the *ritornello* on the dulcimer.

In this setting, Jeney explicitly avoided the movements which had been arranged countless times in the course of the European history of music, such as the Magnificat. The Requiem itself is only symbolically represented by the Introit, but, for instance, the composer was untouched by the possibility of evoking the elemental power and drama of the sequence *Dies irae* text. Instead, he composed a pseudo-Gregorian melody – in which he gives evidence to the degree to which he had learnt the style – to accompany Sándor Weöres's poem for the procession to the bier.

Allusions to Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms* appear in one or two movements as well as an *hommage* to J.S. Bach. The latter is a paraphrase of the duet of the soprano and the tenor beginning *Ich bin nun achzig Jahr* from Bach's early cantata for Mühlhausen, *Gott ist mein König*, BWV 71 (see Example 9).



## Example 9. Air und Choral

**No 29 - Air und Choral - Hommage à J.S.B.**  
 (Variazione sopra "Ich bin nun achtzig Jahr" [Kantate 71. Gott ist mein König])

**Bach:**

The score consists of three systems. The first system shows the vocal parts: Soprano solo (Sopr. solo) and Tenor solo (Ten. solo). The Soprano part is marked 'Tenore' and 'solo', with the lyrics 'Ich bin nun achtzig Jahr, ich bin nun achtzig Jahr,'. The Tenor part has the lyrics 'Ich bin nun achtzig Jahr ich bin nun achtzig Jahr'. The piano accompaniment is shown in the second system. The third system is a choral setting with the lyrics '1. Ad - ja meg az Is - ten, Mit'. The choral setting is marked 'CHORAL - words by Endre Ady (1877-1919)'.

**CHORAL – words by Endre Ady (1877-1919)**

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Jeney replaced Bach's chorale with a chorale-like setting of a poem by Endre Ady. The inclusion of the movement has a tragic background in the composer's life: his wife, Katalin Pik, would often listen to this cantata of Bach, and especially to this aria, in her last year before she committed suicide in 2001. Ottó Orbán's poem ('Hallod-e te sötét árnyék', 'Hear me out, you darkest shadow') was also included for personal reasons. The composer set the poem to music under the influence of the poet's – his friend's – death in 2002 in the so-called *széki lassú*, or 'slow dance from Szék', style of the Hungarian instrumental folk music (see Example 10).

Example 10. *Hallod-e te sötét árnyék*. Unpublished vocal score, private collection, Budapest.

**No 32b - Hallod-e, te sötét árnyék** (Orbán Ottó versére)

Lassú csárdás  
♩ = 32   ♪ = 64

Sopr. solo

Hal - lod - e, te sötét ár - nyék, em - ber vagy - e vagy csak árny - kép.

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Finally, I examine in detail one of the examples listed above. Instead of the *Magnificat* concluding the vespers, Jeney employed a foreign text: *Mária siralma* (Mary's Lament) by Sándor Weöres, from his cycle *Második szimfónia* (*Second Symphony*) of biblical poems. The poem is a paraphrase of the *Ómagyar Mária Siralom* (Old Hungarian Lamentations of Mary), one of the earliest Hungarian linguistic monuments. As with every divergence from the liturgical text in the *Funeral Rite*, this decision by the composer can be justified by dramaturgic or psychological points. Here, the movement may be interpreted as the lamentations of the mourner left on their own after the conclusion of the service. Jeney resonates to the verses of the postmodern poet paraphrasing the Old Hungarian Lamentations of Mary with a surprisingly

postmodern gesture: an imitation of the lament style of folk music (see Example 11).

**Example 11.** *Mary's Lament*. Unpublished vocal score, private collection, Budapest.

The image displays a musical score for a vocal piece titled 'Mary's Lament'. It consists of two systems of music. Each system includes a vocal line (soprano) and a piano accompaniment (Cimb.). The first system is marked 'Parlando' and 'mp' (mezzo-piano). The second system is marked 'f' (forte). The lyrics are in Hungarian and describe a scene of grief and suffering.

*Parlando mp*  
 Nem tud - tam a bű - ről, most a bű meg - ő - let. hal - vány - ság - gal be - le - het. jaj ne - kem, én ő - sm. é - gi vi - rág - szál, i - gen el - vül - töl - töl, mezt - szí - re tá - vor - tál.  
*Cimb. mp con la voce*

*f*  
 I - szo - nyú vas - sze - gek tö - rik a csom - to - dat, fa - csar - ják iz - mo - dat. jaj én h - am, én h - am, te - ke - ni - lő vér - ret csom - bó - kos a ha - jad.

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The melody is built on a descending tetrachord, which is expanded into a pseudo-modal scale of six tones by two notes on the dulcimer/cimbalom, again and again. The descending four-note formula is subjected to continuous shifts and lifts, 'modulations' of a kind. This minimalist inventory has an extraordinary power of dramatic expression: the higher or lower positioning of the four-note formula becomes a simple but compelling tool of increasing or releasing tension. Moreover, the recurrences of the tonal levels expressly follow the emotional undulation of the poem. The same tetrachord is associated, for instance, to the recurring mentioning of childhood memories or the brutality of crucifixion. This all is part of the inventory of a true composer of the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries. As Jeney recounts, after the completion of the movement László Dobszay called his attention to the fact that this piece can be related to the folk music laments of the northern regions (Szatmár and, especially, Bihar) of the Great Hungarian Plain. Jeney was much delighted for having unconsciously

followed a folk music model, but he also confessed that he may not have dared follow this path if he had been conscious of such a specific folk music ideal.<sup>6</sup>

In conclusion: Zoltán Jeney's *Funeral Rite* raises the question of the relationship between tradition and experiment. Jeney, as one of the key figures of the Hungarian neo-avantgarde, was one of the most radical and most consequential composers of the last half-century. He kept to this attitude in his close following of the medieval funeral liturgy and the arrangement of the traditional musical material. Thanks to this, no rifts of style can be observed in the oratorio despite its creation spawning two-and-a-half decades. Also, thanks to his compositional attitude, the work does not become heterogenous, although it draws from extremely diverse poetic and musical traditions. It is not eclectic but universal.

### **A subjective epilogue**

Since Zoltán Jeney's death on 28 October 2019, I have often had the question of musical greatness on my mind. (Alfred Einstein wrote a brilliant book on the subject.<sup>7</sup>) It is often said that this era, our age does not favour musical greatness. But, in Zoltán Jeney's creative habits, as his friend the choir director Salamon Kamp put in his obituary, 'the continuous and uncompromising loyalty to the quality of the task was ever present'. In the moment of this work – even if this moment lasted two and a half decades – this loyalty had an unexpected and unhoped-for result, and found its way into a higher sphere. The *Funeral Rite* breaches the usual boundaries of the present Hungarian concert life in every aspect. Its first and (thus far) only complete performance

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<sup>6</sup> Jeney and Farkas, 'Spekuláció nélkül nincs intuíció ['Without speculation there is no intuition']', 889.

<sup>7</sup> Alfred Einstein, *Greatness in Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1941).

(on 22 October 2005), was realised thanks to another representative of musical greatness, Zoltán Kocsis, yet it is still unavailable on a recording and the world does not even know of its existence. I can only hope that the work will one day take its place in the canon of Western music as one of the most comprehensive and profound musical surveys of death.

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